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Other countries look to U. S. trial by jury system, Archer says

Kelly Nankervis , Midland Daily News

Jury duty is one of the civic duties that makes America tick. It is also the topic of this year's Law Day.

Law Day was established in 1958, and was celebrated Wednesday by Midland County judges, staff, lawyers and law enforcement officials at the Holiday Inn with speaker Dennis Archer. A photo of the late Judge Philip Van Dam was displayed, and colleagues remembered him in their presentations of various awards that were handed out.

Archer, former mayor of Detroit, served as the president of the American Bar Association in 2003 and 2004, among a long list of other activities and honors.

"There's nothing like serving on jury duty," he said, following a quote from Thomas Jefferson: "I consider trial by jury as the only anchor ever yet imagined by man, by which a government can be held to the principles of its constitution."

According to a recent poll by the American Bar Association, about 75 percent polled resisted the idea that jury duty is a burden, while 58 percent considered it a privilege, Archer said.

Those results contrast with continued reports from courts across the county of low response rates to summonses, and people who fail to respond to them at all. Archer said many citizens lack confidence in being good jurors, though they view it as a positive and vital service.

About five million people are called, and one million serve on juries each year in the United States.

Other countries are recognizing the importance of trial by jury, Archer said, and they are adding juries to their legal systems.

"The decision jurors make affect millions of lives," he said. "People have faith in the jury system."

He cited another study, called "Perceptions of the U.S. Justice System," in which 78 percent of respondents said juries are the fairest way to determine guilt or innocence, and 69 percent believe juries are the most important part of our justice system.

An important part of making the system better is making sure juries accurately depict communities.

"They must represent our communities," Archer said. If not, "it cannot do its job to ensure justice for all."

"The American jury system does as much to maintain the sovereignty of the people as any of our other institutions," he said. "It's only when we face and see a loss do we appreciate why the rule of law is so important."

Midland County Circuit Judge Paul J. Clulo said some of the major changes in Midland County's jury system include raising the standard mileage and jury service pay, and limiting the time on call from one month to two weeks.

"I've worked with juries, literally hundreds of juries ... and it seems to me one of the great advantages of our jury systems is they provide a mirror," Clulo said. "The jury is an important part in showing the transparency of the system."

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